

Democrats say they will force lawmakers to vote on increase

(By: Susan Milligan, The Boston Globe) WASHINGTON -- Democrats last night derided President Bush's plan to increase troop levels in Iraq and said they will force members of Congress to vote on whether they back an escalation of the unpopular war.

Even before the president made his remarks, Senate Democratic leaders said they would introduce a resolution next week opposing the increase in troops. While that legislation would not be binding, it would be a first step in countering the Bush strategy and would make it clear to the White House that Congress is unhappy with the plan, said Senator Charles Schumer , Democrat of New York and vice chairman of the Senate Democratic caucus.

The House is preparing a similar resolution. Democrats said the resolutions will pressure Bush to consult with Congress -- something the new majority party has long complained he has refused to do -- while putting every member of Congress on the record as to whether to expand troop levels.

"You can't cloud the waters. You either want to escalate, or you don't," said Representative Gregory Meeks , Democrat of New York.

Representative Rahm Emanuel , Democrat of Illinois and a member of House leadership, said he expected that 50 to 60 Republicans would join a united Democratic caucus in voting for a resolution condemning the idea. "No Democrat supports an escalation," Emanuel said.

The resolutions present Republicans with a politically awkward choice: They can vote to endorse the expansion of a war strongly opposed by the American people, or defy their president at a time when he is seeking to build support for a new strategy in Iraq.

Democrats uniformly blasted the Bush plan last night, calling it a misguided effort.

"Escalation of this war is not the change the American people called for in the last election.

Twenty-thousand American soldiers are too few to end this civil war in Iraq and too many American lives to risk on top of those we've already lost," said Senate majority whip Dick Durbin, Democrat of Illinois.

Democrats said Bush should pursue a political and diplomatic solution to the four-year-old war, instead of adding troops.

By swelling troop levels, "He's not only going to stay the course; he's going to escalate the course," said Senator Edward M. Kennedy , Democrat of Massachusetts.

Democrats hope the White House will back down from its proposal to increase troop levels if it becomes clear there is little support for it on Capitol Hill. But if Bush does not change his policy, Democrats say they may take more severe action to limit troop levels, such as refusing to fund additional troops.

While Congress has limited authority in foreign policy matters, it has used its budget powers to prevent the executive branch from engaging in certain activities abroad. Congress set maximum troop levels to force US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1974 and in 1983 prevented President Reagan from sending more troops to Lebanon.

Kennedy has prepared legislation that would require the president to get permission from Congress to expand the number of troops in Iraq, and bar him from spending additional money to fund the increase in troop levels.

Some members of Congress, however, are leery of capping troop levels or refusing to fund a troop expansion. Even while vehemently opposing the war, lawmakers are very sensitive about appearing to be less than supportive of the troops.

"I think the escalation is not going to make a difference" in stabilizing Iraq, said Representative Russ Carnahan , Democrat of Missouri. But asked if he would support a ban on funding a troop increase, Carnahan said, "I wouldn't go that far right now."

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